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THE REALITIES OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

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and

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The Great War is challenging every man and every institution. What things are really worth while? Some of our ideas and habits must go to the scrap heap. Others, gaining new meaning, will be built into a new and better life. What about religion? What in it is real enough and vital enough to meet the challenge?

This course offers to ministers and to religious leaders a teaching medium through which to lead their people to a personal appreciation of those things in religion which are fundamental—the great realities of the Christian religion. A glance through this first study will illustrate the comprehensive yet simple method of the course which draws upon the experience of great religious leaders in all ages as source material. No books other than the Bible are required. For use in classes the studies are published simultaneously in THE INSTITUTE¹ at 50 cents. Suggestions to leaders are published only in the BIBLICAL WORLD.

NOTE TO THE INEXPERIENCED STUDENT

Read each day's portion carefully, and if possible think it through until you can satisfactorily consider the questions which the instructor raises. The ability to think clearly will be one of the most valuable results of this study. If you should find a question which puzzles or disturbs you, and it is not easy to satisfy yourself concerning it on the day on which you find it, pass on to the next day's work without anxiety. It is very possible that the question will answer itself through your later study. If you are satisfied after some time that the question is still unanswered, refer it to THE INSTITUTE headquarters and help will be given you by correspondence.

INTRODUCTION

Religion is a personal experience. We often think of it as a system of doctrines to be learned, or as a form of worship. But neither doctrine nor worship has any meaning unless a personal experience is thereby expressed.

In this course we shall be studying religion as a personal experience. We shall try to see how some of the great religious utterances of men of the Bible, as well as of men in Christian history, are expressions of the questionings, the hopes, and

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the moral convictions of persons who were trying to find the meaning of the experiences through which they were led.

Religious experience consists in the attempt to relate the events of one's life to the great spiritual forces in the universe, and thereby to ennoble and strengthen and consecrate life in vital communion with God's purposes. Often the religious man is perplexed. He does not know what God's purposes are. He has to think over his experiences and find something which suggests a way of prayer and trust. If we once see that it is this quest for God which makes religion vital, we shall be prepared to understand why religious doctrines vary so much in content from age to age. It is because the problems of experience vary. The religious significance of any belief must always be sought in the experience which the belief interprets rather than in the content of doctrine as such.

The result of such a study as this will be twofold. On the one hand, we shall be inspired and stimulated by the religious experiences of others; on the other hand, we shall see that a vital religion for us is to be attained, not by any mere repetition of what other men have said, but by the relating of our own experience to God in ways which are honest and genuine for us. To share the spiritual aspirations of great religious souls is better than merely to repeat their doctrines.

Outline of the Course

- Study I. Religion as a Personal Experience.
- Study II. Inspiration and Revelation.
- Study III. The Meaning of God in Experience.
- Study IV. The Meaning of Salvation.
- Study V. Christian Living.
- Study VI. The Future Hope.

STUDY I

RELIGION AS A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

First day.—§ 1. Read Judg., chap. 5. This is one of the oldest pieces of Hebrew literature. It is a triumphal ode celebrating the defeat of the Canaanites. What is the poet thankful for in vs. 2? What does he think Jehovah did for Israel (vss. 4, 5, 13, 20)? What conception of God is revealed in vss. 23, 31? Note that this song comes from a people whose pressing problem was the contest with a dangerous enemy. Would you call their religion practical? What kind of help did such religion give them? The characteristic of Hebrew poetry is parallelism or repetition rather than rhyme. It will help you to understand this poem if you appreciate beforehand the fact that one line is frequently but the repetition of the thought of the preceding line in another form.

Second day.—§ 2. What religious expectation did Saul have when he first sought Samuel (I Sam. 9:5-10)? Consider the religious experience involved in the anointing (9:25; 10:1). Note Saul's liability to religious enthusiasm (10:9-13; 19:24; 11:6). How was this explained in those times? Note also his tendency to melancholy, attributed to an evil spirit (16:14; 18:10-12).

Third day.—Read I Sam., chap. 15. Consider the bloody nature of the command given by the prophet. Why did Saul save some of the spoil? Note

that the sin was a failure to obey implicitly. What kind of religion calls for absolute obedience to arbitrary demands? Were there finer possibilities in a religion which could have the noble passage, vs. 22?

Fourth day.—Read I Sam. 22:3, 5; 23:2, 4, 9-12; 25:39; 30:8. With regard to each of these passages consider what David expected his religion to do for him. Note how practical and material was the help expected. Read 26:19-20. It was thought that Jehovah might arbitrarily influence men, but he could be persuaded to desist. Also it was thought that if a Hebrew left Israel he moved away from the jurisdiction of Jehovah. Read II Sam. 12:1-7. What deeper view of God's interest in righteousness is here found?

Fifth day.—Read I Sam., chap. 24. This incident again presents a God whose anger is arbitrary and dangerous, and yet there is a beautiful confidence in his mercy (vs. 14.) We are not sure whether David wrote any psalms, so we shall not make use of them in estimating his religion. On the basis of all the passages studied consider how far this early religion was a kind of bargain with God and how far it was a spiritual fellowship.

Sixth day.—Read I Kings 22:1-23. What is Micaiah's idea of the way in which Jehovah achieves his ends? If a nation should organize its diplomacy through such lying messengers as these that the prophet imagines are engaged to do Jehovah's bidding, how should we think of it today? Micaiah is evidently a noble man ready to suffer for conscience' sake, but the religion which helps him to live his brave life finds no difficulty with deception.

Seventh day.—The material heretofore studied comes from the time before the great ethical prophets arose. It represents a religious experience of a somewhat materialistic type and yet with some distinctly higher elements gradually developing. Note (1) how simple and direct is God's interest in the world of human affairs; (2) how definite and practical is the assistance which men think they can get from God; (3) that God generally expects some kind of payment for his favors; (4) that God is thought of as using diplomatic means to achieve his ends such as would not seem moral to us. Compare these points with your own religious experience.

Eighth day.—§ 3. We pass over more than a century during which the prophets Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, and others have spoken out of deeper religious experience. But the people tend to prefer the old materialistic religion, which seems more business-like. Read Jer. 7:1-11. Jeremiah is speaking to a people very much concerned to be religious in this practical way. Verse 4 indicates their confidence that the temple will always stand. What are the conditions upon which Jeremiah believes the divine favor can be secured? What actual conditions does he find among the people? What then does Jeremiah believe is God's chief concern?

Ninth day.—Read Jer. 18:1-11. Picture the striking scene in the potter's shop. What does the figure of the clay imply as to Jeremiah's idea of God's control over human affairs? Note that the people were quoting previous prophecies regarding the security of Israel and the destruction of other nations. These promises had been given by Isaiah and others as an encouragement to patriotism and righteousness. But Jeremiah insists that God never gives unconditional promises.

Tenth day.—Read Jer. 14:11, 12; 15:1-3; 25:8-11. These words imply Jeremiah's conviction that the political situation in Judah was hopeless. He sees the inevitableness of the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadrezzar. But why does he think Nebuchadrezzar will come? Who is the real actor in the awful calamity? How did Jeremiah harmonize his religion and his patriotism? Imagine a righteous preacher in Turkey today: could he be a patriot? What would he have to tell the wicked Ottoman rulers?

Eleventh day.—Read Jer., chap. 34. Consider how a patriot prophet would feel with the enemy actually laying siege to the capital. He faces the facts and finds God in them. Note the endeavor of the people to curry favor with God by releasing the slaves, then re-enslaving them as soon as the enemy had withdrawn. How did Jeremiah interpret God's attitude toward such conduct?

Twelfth day.—Read Jer. 31:27, 28; 32:36-44. What was Jeremiah's hope for his people? On what did he base it? What does this imply regarding Jehovah's relation to the nations?

Thirteenth day.—Think over Jeremiah's experience and try to estimate what his religion did for him in helping him to solve his life-problems. It is probable that he was the only man in Jerusalem who got any meaning out of the confused events of his time. He was sure that there was a moral order in the universe. He found this in regarding every event as the direct act of Jehovah. We are more accustomed to think of the operation of cause and effect in material and political affairs. Consider then how your own religion helps you to meet and interpret the great calamities of life.

Fourteenth day.—§ 4. Jeremiah's sad task was to prepare his people for the Babylonian captivity. He interpreted it as a divine chastisement. A later prophet, whose writings became attached to those of the old prophet Isaiah, sought to prepare the people for a return to Palestine. He had a new thought of Israel as the Servant of Jehovah. Read Isa. 41:8-10; 44:21-23; 49:1-4. How warm and confident is the prophet's sense of God's care! What did he think was Israel's work?

Fifteenth day.—Read Isa. 49:5, 6; 42:1-9. The thought changes. The prophet sees that not all Israel is fit to be the chosen Servant, but only the best of Israel. The Servant is that righteous part of Israel through which the wicked part can be saved. What is the Servant now to do? Is the blessing to be confined to Israel? We see the prophets coming to a sense of God's universal love. This prophet is seeking to solve the difficult problem of the suffering of the righteous in this world. He finds the solution in God's wider purpose of love.

Sixteenth day.—§ 5. Recalling that still further centuries have passed, read Matt. 5:38-48; 6:25-34; 7:12. Think of these words as expressing Jesus' own personal experience. Try to picture his life at Nazareth lived according to these principles. How would such a religious attitude toward men affect his daily life as a son, brother, neighbor, workman? What would be his temper and disposition if he lived with God utterly free from anxiety? On what ground did he feel that he could be thus free? Compare this attitude with that of the prophets toward God's providence. Consider your own social and religious life in comparison with that of Jesus.

Seventeenth day.—Read Luke 4:1-13. The actual experience of Jesus in the temptation is not easy to follow. It is given to us in parable form. Consider that he was just about to enter upon his life-mission: it would be fraught with personal peril and might be accomplished by different means, not all of them of the highest. What general principles did he follow? What was his feeling of God's relation to his life-work? Could you distinguish between what men sometimes call practical and what Jesus regarded as worth while? Note how absolutely sure he was that God was with him in his work and that there was a right way to carry it on.

Eighteenth day.—Read Mark 10:13-16; Luke 19:1-10. What was Jesus' view of God's estimate of children? Has this any bearing on the fundamental nature of religious experience? Can a child be religious? How much intellectual accuracy of thought is necessary to be a Christian? What did Jesus do in order to make Zacchaeus a disciple? What evidence of conversion did the chief publican give? What did Jesus think of the evidence? What did religion mean to Zacchaeus after meeting Jesus? From Jesus' attitude toward children and toward a sinner we see his faith that man can live in fellowship with God. This faith in man is part of his religious experience.

Nineteenth day.—Read Matt. 26:36-46. What were Jesus' feelings as he went into Gethsemane? What was the real purpose of his prayer? What faith does his prayer imply? Consider the various temptations to which Jesus was then subject—some of them very subtle. He was seeking most of all to know God's will. How far does such an attitude enable one to discern duty? Why did Jesus regain his calmness after the prayer? Consider the religious experience of a courage based on the confidence that you are performing the highest possible duty, which has been made clear to you through a complete dependence on God.

Twentieth day.—We have studied the religious experiences of soldiers of the early Hebrew time more than a thousand years B.C., of various of the prophets of the intervening centuries, and of Jesus. Notice that to all of them religion was a practical help in meeting their problems. The difference in the religious experience lies in the different kinds of help that each man needed and sought. Think through this long development and see if you can discern a deepening of experience as time went on. Compare your own practical experience of religion with that of these characters.

Twenty-first day.—§ 6. St. Augustine (354-430 A.D.) was one of the greatest men in the history of Christianity. For years he tried vainly to find religious satisfaction, but was finally led marvelously into the consciousness of God's forgiving love. Study carefully the following prayer of his:

"O Lord, help us to turn and seek thee; for thou hast not forsaken thy creatures as we have forsaken thee, our Creator. Let us turn and seek thee, for we know thou art here in our hearts, when we confess to thee, when we cast ourselves on thee, and weep in thy bosom, after all our rugged ways; and thou dost gently wipe away our tears, and we weep the more for joy; because thou, Lord, who madest us, dost remake and comfort us."

Twenty-second day.—Where did Augustine find God? Why was it so long before he found God? What did God's presence mean to Augustine? Can you see how this particular kind of a prayer grew out of a real experience?

Twenty-third day.—§ 7. St. Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) was a romantic young soldier, happy, generous, adventurous, and winsome. His life was changed by a vision, and he carried over into his Christian life the spirit of romance and adventure, taking “lady poverty” as his bride, making humility and obedience to Christ beautiful acts of loyalty, and lavishing generous love on birds and animals as well as on his fellow-men. Read carefully the following utterances of his:

Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Moon and the stars that thou hast made bright and precious and beautiful. Be praised, my Lord, for Brother Wind, and for the air and cloud and the clear sky and for all weathers through which thou givest sustenance to thy creatures. Be praised, my Lord, for Sister Water, that is very useful and humble and precious and chaste. Be praised, my Lord, for Sister, Our Mother Earth, that doth cherish and keep us, and produces various fruits with coloured flowers and the grass. Be praised, my Lord, for those who forgive for love of thee, and endure sickness and tribulation; blessed are they who endure in peace; for by thee, Most High, shall they be crowned.

Twenty-fourth day.—How did St. Francis feel toward the moon and the wind and other familiar things? Was this feeling religious? If so, why? Did St. Francis’ temperament have anything to do with his religion? Compare this expression of religion with that of St. Augustine (twenty-first day).

Twenty-fifth day.—§ 8. The great poet, Milton, was smitten with blindness, and thus prevented from many activities in which he longed to engage. How can a blind and helpless man be religious? Read the following lines from one of his sonnets:

Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?
I fondly ask:—But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies; God doth not need
Either man’s work, or his own gifts: who best
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best: His state
Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed
And post o’er land and ocean without rest—
They also serve who only stand and wait.

Twenty-sixth day.—What difference did Milton’s blindness make in his religious life? What conception of God helped him to find religious satisfaction? Do you think that the last line of the poem would be an appropriate expression of religion for a strong and self-confident religious worker? Can you see how intimately this utterance is related to Milton’s experience?

Twenty-seventh day.—§ 9. Lord Tennyson lost a very dear friend by death, and the catastrophe was a challenge to his faith. In his great poem, *In Memoriam*, he faced the black challenge and found a religious answer. Read the following lines:

Our little systems have their day:
They have their day and cease to be:
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they.

We have but faith; we cannot know;
For knowledge is of things we see;
And yet we trust it comes from thee,
A beam in darkness: let it grow.

Twenty-eighth day.—Is it possible to be religious when one is compelled to doubt? Could Tennyson formulate a very positive creed? What is there religious about the sentiment of these lines? Compare this kind of religious experience with that of St. Francis (twenty-third day). Could Tennyson have expressed himself honestly in the words of St. Francis?

Twenty-ninth day.—§ 10. Abraham Lincoln, after four years of responsibility during the terrible Civil War, in his second inaugural address spoke as follows:

The Almighty has his own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offenses! for it must needs be that offenses come; but woe unto that man by whom the offense cometh." If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through his appointed time, he now wills to remove, and that he gives to both North and South this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God always ascribe to him?

Do you think a man like Lincoln could carry on a great war without feeling that it had a religious meaning? What was this meaning? Could the war end with any compromise on the slavery question? What would be the effect of any such compromise on religious faith?

Thirtieth day.—Lincoln's inaugural address concludes with these words:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.

Notice the precise things to which Lincoln pledges himself. Were these things suggested by the circumstances which he faced? Is it a good kind of religion which he professes? Compare this sentiment with that of Deborah (first day), and see how the content of religion has changed in the course of the centuries.

Thirty-first day.—§ 11. On the occasion of America's entrance into the great world-war in April, 1917, President Wilson voiced the ideal of a new kind of world which this nation might help to make—a world in which all nations should have equal rights and equal responsibilities on a basis of justice, and where predatory warfare should be outlawed. Said he:

We are glad . . . to fight thus for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples, the German peoples included, for the rights of nations great and small, and the privilege of men everywhere to choose their way of life and of obedience. . . . We have no selfish ends to serve. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind.

President Wilson's message to Congress, December 4, 1917, reiterating this noble, humanitarian ideal, closed with the words:

A supreme moment of history has come. The eyes of the people have been opened and they see. The hand of God is laid upon the nations. He will show them his favor, I devoutly believe, only if they rise to the clear heights of his own justice and mercy.

What is the difference between a war in which one nation seeks to crush others for its own advantage and a war waged for the liberation of all nations from evil

habits of jealousy and greed? How did President Wilson's ideal grow out of his experience as responsible head of the United States? Put in your own words the standard to which God summons nations as it is suggested in the second quotation. Is there as real religion in this utterance as in Deborah's song? As you compare the two, do you find any evidence that religion itself becomes purer and nobler because of centuries of religious striving?

What an amazing variety in religious ideals we find in the utterances which we have studied! Deborah's barbaric song of triumph seems to have almost nothing in common with Lincoln's "with malice toward none and with charity for all," or with President Wilson's ideal of a world with equal rights for all peoples.

Perhaps one who surveys these religious utterances will at first be impressed with the thought that if such different and even contradictory ideas are sanctioned by religion not much is to be hoped for in the way of definite standards. But a more sympathetic study will reveal the fact that in every instance the religious person is relating his life with its profound experiences to the living God. The things most real to him are so important that he wants to feel the power and the purpose of God in these events.

It is precisely this which makes religion vital. Just because Deborah without reserve sought God's blessing on a military triumph she was doing the thing which made possible a religious testing of her ideals. Down through the centuries the men who have honestly and passionately sought to relate their precious experiences to God have learned more of God's character and purpose, until today we are the grateful heirs of a rich and varied human quest for God with all that has been learned from that quest. If we today would be genuinely religious, we must not be content with merely repeating familiar doctrines; we, too, must seek with all our might to relate the great experiences of our life and of our age to God, that we may learn his purposes concerning us.

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. Give two or three important descriptive words which seem to you to express the spirit of the song of Deborah.
2. Describe what might be called Saul's religious views.
3. Since Samuel and Saul were contemporaries, why was Samuel's idea of God different from and higher than that of Saul?
4. Is it David's religion which prompts his reply to Nathan (II Sam. 12:5, 6)? If so, how do you account for other statements which show David to have been savage and cruel? Estimate David's religion on the basis of the history.
5. Give evidences of the sense of security or permanency which pervaded Israel in the time of Jeremiah's early ministry.
6. Why was Jeremiah alone filled with gloomy forebodings?
7. How did the parable of the Clay and the Potter express Jeremiah's idea of God in history?
8. Why is it right to call Jeremiah a patriot, and what was his hope for his people?
9. How fully do we today believe that a country founded upon justice and righteousness will endure while others fall?

10. Was religion weakened or strengthened by the changes in the course of history from Deborah to Jeremiah?
11. Is our ideal of righteousness the same as that of Jeremiah?
12. Which prophet cited gives us the great ideal of service as an element of religion?
13. What changes of emphasis came to our religion through Jesus' direction of his teaching toward individual rather than national conduct?
14. Can a nation move except as an organized group of individuals?
15. (a) What was Jesus' method of meeting temptation?
(b) How did he discern duty?
(c) How did his conception of God appear in his conduct?
(d) What did he get out of his religion?
16. What was the particular aspect of God which gave St. Augustine the greatest satisfaction? Why?
17. What were the characteristics of St. Francis' religion? Why?
18. What experience of the poet Milton threw emphasis upon patience and inactivity as an expression of religion?
19. What was Tennyson's religious problem?
20. Describe the religion of a modern statesman as seen in Lincoln.

SUGGESTIONS TO LEADERS OF CLASSES

The greatest service which this course can render to those who study it is to enable them to form a habit of clear thinking, and so to secure a basis for right action. The majority of people do not relate their thinking on life in general to their thought on religion, or rather do not realize that in their thinking upon life they are expressing their religion. It is important to help people to distinguish between theology, which is a historical development, and religion, which is an expression of the human soul. It would perhaps be advisable for the leader to make this the theme of his introductory talk. A few stories of the origin of dogmatic doctrines as found in the history of the church would help to illustrate the one side, and the raising of a few fundamental questions which can be answered from personal observation and experience will suggest the other.

The material of this month is particularly rich in possibilities for definite work on the part of the members, resulting in definite reports contributing to interesting programs. Indeed it would be wise to hold four meetings during the month rather than two, and to divide the programs suggested, to cover them.

PROGRAM I

Topics for members for the first meeting may be:

1. The reading of Deborah's song by a *proficient reader*.
2. Religious ideals of the Hebrews in the days of the judges, as seen in this song. (A class contribution.)
3. Stories of Saul and Samuel showing distinctive marks of their individual religion.
4. David's religious ideas as seen in his conduct on various occasions. (Do not omit the little story in II Sam. 23:13-17.)